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CURRICULUM VITAE

1986	M.A. in Social Anthropology. University of Edinburgh.
1993	Ph.D. in Sociology. University of California, Los Angeles.
1993-2002	Lecturer through to Reader, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, University of Queensland, Australia.
2003-2007	Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Yale University.
2007	Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, Yale University.

FORSCHUNGSPROJEKT

„THE PUBLIC NARRATION OF SCIENCE CARE“

My proposed research concerns the public narration of what I call 'science scares'. These are extreme worries about technological and environmental dangers that periodically emerge in the public sphere. Recent examples include the Y2K virus, bird 'flu, swine fever, SARS, genetically modified organisms and global warming. Of course Ulrich Beck has already written about such things. From my perspective his approach was insufficiently cultural, failing to understand the independent role of narrative and symbol in the construction of a risk consciousness (ironically enough his book can be used as data for such an analysis) and possibilities for radical swings in visibility and concern (he theorizes a sort of enduring baseline awareness). Further his emphasis is on the potential of risk events for social integration (pragmatic international cooperation, a global risk consciousness) rather than as a basis for conflict and cultural boundaries. My argument is that such episodes have much in common with divisive moral panics. Imagery falls into stereotyped patterns, concern and interest spikes and then disappears, narratives predict a potential global doom that never arises; then we get tired and move on to the next unseen, unknowable threat. The cultural forms underlying such science scares are in many ways primordial, with expert information translated into elementary cultural forms. For example, there is resonance with apocalyptic visions from the Bible, with gothic understandings of science, with the myth complex of Faust, with the conspiracy imagery of medieval witch theology and with Durkheimian ideas about the pure and impure sacred. This is a project that sits at the boundaries of literatures on moral panic, the public understanding of science, the civil and media spheres, and cultural and literary theory. It is important to emphasize that whether or not such fears are 'rationally' justified by 'objective' levels of risk, cultural representations of dangers can have real consequences. They can shape the allocation of priorities, the uptake of risk aversion measures, popular deference to expert authority, panic, consumption patterns and collective identity. This holds even in contexts where there is a strong degree of scientific consensus (e.g. global warming) which makes the label of 'scare' seem problematic. Here the translation of an 'inconvenient truth' into a culturally accessible package of dangers must be understood as an important step mediating expert knowledge with political action paths and everyday motivations. My intent is not to debunk but to understand how we think through risk and uncertainty.

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